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Korean Resentment Grows Against Chun

Ex-Leader's Failure to Apologize Creates Dilemma

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SEOUL, South Korea—South Koreans are testing the power of their newly strengthened democratic institutions by aiming them backwards—exposing the controversial history of the previous authoritarian regime.

It may seem curious that a country which has just hosted a successful Olympiad, that continues to boom economically, and that is widely regarded as a model for newly developing nations should be focusing on its past. But the country's current obsession with clearing up the history of corruption and repression of the regime of former President Chun Doo Hwan is seen by many Koreans as necessary: They seek to expose and then bury the past so they can move on to the future.

For several days last week Koreans were transfixed by televised National Assembly hearings at which a parade of witnesses, including top businessmen, former government officials and Chun aides, were quizzed about corruption by the former president, his family and associates. Some 83% of Koreans say they watched an hour or more, according to a Gallup Poll—better ratings than for the Olympics.

In the months after Mr. Chun stepped down in February, the public—except for students and dissidents, who have mounted violent street protests demanding the arrest of Mr. Chun and his wife for corruption—appeared willing to forgive and forget. But as evidence mounted of wrongdoing during Mr. Chun's eight-year rule, and as weeks dragged by without an apology from the former strongman, public outrage has grown.

Five Relatives Charged

This weekend, opposition leader Kim Dae Jung said the former president's "failure to show repentance or reflection" would force him to ask prosecutors to start criminal proceedings. The party of the other leading opposition leader, Kim Young Sam, also said it would seek criminal investigations. In the past, both major opposition parties had said they wouldn't press for criminal prosecution if Mr. Chun apologized, returned ill-gotten gains and returned to live quietly in his hometown in southeastern Korea.

On Saturday, Mr. Chun's elder brother and cousin were arrested, bringing to five the number of Chun relatives charged with enriching themselves during his regime.



Chun Doo Hwan

His younger brother has already been sentenced to seven years for embezzlement. Several other family members are under investigation and at least two of them may be charged this week, prosecutors say.

All this poses a dilemma for President Roh Tae Woo, a former general who supported Mr. Chun's military takeover in 1979. The president was to return Monday from an 11-day official tour of Southeast Asia and Australia.

While the situations obviously are very different, there are some similarities to the dilemma that confronted President Gerald Ford when he assumed the U.S. presidency in the wake of Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation. President Ford pardoned the former president, and the U.S. gradually put Watergate behind it. In the Korean case, the wounds run much deeper. Unlike Mr. Nixon, Mr. Chun is accused of unlawful seizure of power, brutality and corruption. Any sort of amnesty could undermine still-tentative public support for Mr. Roh's rule.

Meanwhile, Reuter new agency reported that Mr. Chun intends to demand a meeting with President Roh at which he will threaten to make revelations about his regime that could tarnish the reputation of President Roh and others.

Many Koreans say they want to forget the tear gas, political arrests and press suppression under the Chun administration, which blot out many people's appreciation of the rapid economic progress during those same years, for which they grant the former president little credit.

"I just want to forget about [Mr. Chun]," said businessman Chung Ju Yung in televised testimony, a comment that many Koreans say spoke their mind. Mr. Chung, 79-year-old founder and honorary chairman of the giant Hyundai Group, said he and other businessmen were coerced to donate to Mr. Chun's private foundation.

But many Koreans also say Mr. Chun can't be forgotten until he makes an effort at being forgiven. And the longer he waits, the less likely that Koreans will give him a chance. Public outrage, restrained before and during the Olympics, has been reignited by the televised hearings in which Mr. Chun's deputies, including the former presidential security chief, were grilled by the opposition, including some men who had been arrested or tortured under their authority.

For Koreans, the leap from an authoritarian regime to a no-holds-barred public

investigation in a little over a year and a half is almost revolutionary. The harsh questioning of officials by assemblymen is "a kind of catharsis for people, even revenge," says Yoo Kun Il, senior editorial writer at Chosun Ilbo newspaper. Says a 23-year-old soldier, "I never imagined I could see such powerful people in a situation like that. It's a good thing."

Mr. Chun's Ghost

For the ruling Democratic Justice Party, the ghost of Mr. Chun, who founded the party, is a major liability. Unable to make the former president apologize, it is tainted by its association with his regime and shares little of the popularity enjoyed by Mr. Roh. And while the investigations aren't expected to undermine stability, they could undermine Mr. Roh in a promised referendum on his performance.

By Korea's Confucian notions of ruler as moral exemplar, Mr. Chun's behavior—and certainly that of his relatives—was flagrant. For example, the former president's large but plain-looking Seoul home, though it resembles those of the professors and businessmen who are his neighbors, is depicted as a palace of luxury and corruption in newspaper cartoons.

Says Hwan Kwang Yup, who lives on a bed-sized platform at the back of his hardware store near Mr. Chun's house, for which he once delivered nails during its construction, "It's so big, I almost got lost going in and out."

Political analysts say the public desire to see justice done is fed not only by resentment of Mr. Chun, but by the grievances of centuries of foreign domination and domestic authoritarianism.

"Korea's problem is that in previous transitions of power [which until this year were always, in this century, carried out by force] we never cleared up the past," says opposition policymaker Lee Shim Bom, who was tortured by the Chun government and is now helping the assembly investigation. "We never openly examined the legacy of the Japanese occupation, nor the days of Syngman Rhee or Park Chung Hee. So it is very important, for once in our history, to clarify the past and establish a sense of justice."



Roh Tae Woo